

## Article

# Anthropological Linguistic Study of Names as Representations of Family and Community Origins and Identity Among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria

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## Abstract

Names and naming are some of the ways by which Igbo families and communities of Southeastern Nigeria construe and express ideation about their origins, kinship, intergroup relations, social and spiritual roles, and identity. The names that most Igbo families and communities bear provide information about their ancestry, historical ties, and the experiences and circumstances that define their existence as a distinct people. Among the Igbo, names are not merely a means of identification; they are perceived as carriers of history and social experiences. Igbo communities and families use names to identify the descendants (*umu*—children) of a particular progenitor, indicate the specific number of in-group members that share common ancestry or social bond (name + number marker), indicate the spatial location of a community, and indicate the spiritual roles of a community or family. Igbo families in particular use the names they bear to frame the social experiences and situations that surround the birth of a child (*nwa*), peculiar professions associated with a family, and peculiar social, economic or spiritual roles associated with some families, among other uses. Thus, based on the tenets of anthropological/cultural linguistics, this study will examine the social and cultural-cognitive factors that shape how the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria derive community and family names. While insights from anthropological linguistics provide the framework for the study of the names in the social and cultural contexts, the cognitive dimensions of this study derive from the framework of Cultural Linguistics (CL). This ensures that the cognitive aspects of the names are integrated into the analysis. Many of the existing studies on Igbo names and naming practices have centred chiefly on personal names, while only a handful have focused on community and family names among the Igbo. This study, which draws chiefly from anthropological linguistics (AL) and Cultural Linguistics (CL), aims to address this lacuna.

**Keywords:** Igbo; Southeastern Nigeria; names; family; community; anthropological/cultural linguistics



Received: 19 March 2026

Revised: 28 April 2026

Accepted: 30 July 2026

Published: 3 August 2026

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## 1. Introduction

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria use names to index family and community heritage, history and identity. Igbo family and community names encode the cultural and cognitive orientations of the progenitors and descendants of a family or community. The Igbo language is spoken by the Igbo ethnic group, who are mainly found in the Southeastern part of Nigeria and some areas in the South-south geopolitical zone of the country. The Igbo

language has many dialectal varieties, which are mutually intelligible to different degrees. In spite of the dialectical diversity of the Igbo language, most Igbo persons, families and communities can be identified by the names they bear. This study is restricted to the examination of the anthropological and cognitive factors that underlie selected Igbo family and community names. The Igbo are traditionally religious. They believe in the power of the supernatural and the ability of the supernatural to influence the affairs of humans. Names are some of the means by which the Igbo affirm their belief in the supernatural. There are family and community names that assert allegiance to some deities and other supernatural forces. In the same vein, there are family and community names that clearly index the founder of a family or community, the geographical location of a community, the profession/occupation associated with a family, or the relationship between a family or community and other non-human entities like animals or reptiles. The full meaning and significance of most Igbo family and community names cannot be comprehended at the surface level of signification. Understanding the history and culture of the community or family is fundamental to understanding the meaning of the names bestowed on them by their progenitors. Some Igbo family and community names are cognitively derived by mapping certain positive attributes of a respected entity onto the family or community. For instance, the names *Umuagu* (children of leopard) and *Umuodum* (children of lion) do not imply that the communities descended from animal ancestry; rather, the communities derived their names by mapping the ontological features of deftness and bravery associated with the animals onto themselves.

This study aims at examining the cultural and cognitive frames that underlie some Igbo family and community names as heritage and identity markers. This study discovered that the cultural beliefs, assumptions and practices of the Igbo are largely responsible for the type of names they bestow on their families and communities. The names provide insights into the history, beliefs, occupation/profession and social circumstances that are crucial to the origins, identity and survival of the family or community. At the level of theory, this study is significant in that it reveals how insights from anthropological linguistics and cultural linguistics can be used to unearth the deeper meanings of Igbo family and community names. At the level of practice, this study makes a modest contribution to the existing body of knowledge on Igbo family and community names. Scholars and linguists who are interested in the documentation of Igbo family and place names will find this work useful.

## 2. Literature Review

The Igbo take the processes of naming and names as a social practice that enables individuals and groups to identify themselves as members of a group or community. This explains why Mensah (2024, p. 2) contends that

Names are the most important anchors of personal identity that define how human beings see themselves and how others perceive them. They help bearers to make social connections, build relationships and maintain membership of a particular community of practice.

Thus, without names, individuals, groups and places would lose their identities and social relevance as members of human society. Names enable individuals and groups to orient themselves as members of the human cultural ecosystem. The social meaning of names among the Igbo and other ethnic groups in Nigeria is determined by context. The meanings of names do not exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by social and contextual factors such as history, religion or psycho-cognition (Kamalu et al. 2024). This explains why Nkamigbo (2019) argues that African names are closely connected to the traditional beliefs

and values of African people. Thus, the names that individuals, families and communities bear are products of several contextual factors that are crucial to their existence.

Helleland (2012) argues that names are indispensable parts of our language. We use names when we refer to individuals or objects, like people, animals, buildings, organizations, artefacts, and places. Naming is perceived as a cultural practice that enables human beings to identify, classify and label the persons and entities in their semiotic environment (see Kamalu et al. 2024). Ubahakwe (1981, p. 99), who contends that Igbo and other African names are rich in “culture content”, posits that names

...are not simply labels used, as baggage tags, for mere identification purposes. An indigenous African name on the whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents or family of the bearer and in a more general sense, points to the values of the society into which the individual is born. Unaware of these, some Western scholars, are puzzled that Africans make a “fuss” about names.

Batoma (2006, p. 1) avers that “a major trend in African studies today consists in using traces of African culture embedded in African names and naming practices to recover or reconstruct African heritage. African names are oral records that can be meticulously processed and analyzed by African and Africana scholars.” Several studies have been conducted on Igbo personal names (Ubahakwe 1982; Onumajuru 2016; Nkamigbo 2019; Madu and Sone 2022; Inyima and Nwosu 2025; Fubara-Manuel et al. 2026), and Igbo names for non-human entities (Onumajuru and Eze 2019; Kamalu 2020), but there is not much research on the origins, social and cultural–cognitive motivations and significance of Igbo family and community names. This gap in the linguistic and cultural studies of Igbo family and community names is what this study sets out to address.

*Family name*, a casual synonym of *surname* (Coates and Parkin 2024), is used to distinguish persons according to their origin, parentage, occupation, and so on. The expressions family name and surname mean the same thing when used in the context of this study. In some traditional societies, family names enable members of a community to know the particular family an individual comes from. Family names serve as identity markers, particularly in communities where the members know each other. Thus, the mere mention of some family names in some communities could lead the hearers to make assumptions regarding the particular family the name-bearer could come from. In some larger communities, where more than one family may bear a particular family name, the hearers might ask for more specific information to enable them to identify the particular family being talked about in the context of a specific interaction. For instance, if a young man from a neighbouring community introduces himself as Emeka Nwosu from the Nnebukwu community, the hearers could ask a series of questions, such as, which of the Nwosu families at Nnebukwu? This would only happen in contexts where more than one family bear the surname Nwosu in a community. The interactants may ask the young man if he is from the family of Nwosu, the great wine tapper, or Nwosu, the great hunter. The response of the young man would allow the hearer to know the exact family Emeka comes from in this community. In this context, the occupation of the family becomes a distinguishing factor or identity marker. Another justification for the use of a family name or surname is to distinguish persons in the same community who bear the same personal name. Thus, the family name Nwosu distinguishes Emeka Nwosu from other bearers of the name Emeka in the same community; hence, Emeka Nwosu is distinguished from Emeka Okafor, Emeka Nnaji, Emeka Obiwuru, and so on in the community. Thus, Coates and Parkin (2024, p. 1) contend that “in practical terms, the main function of surnaming is to distinguish bearers of the same given name(s) from each other in societies where given names are typically drawn from a small traditional pool or where naming a child after another person is prevalent.”

[Ibemesi \(2011\)](#) argues that family names/surnames record family and community history among the Igbo. According to her, “Family names are personal names that people take on as surnames at any time of the family history” (p. 154). Names are closely tied with identity and contain rich family and cultural history. Ibemesi classified typical Igbo family names/surnames into patronymic names, which are names that distinguish the bearers by reference to their fathers; matronymic names, which are names that make reference to their mother; and occupational names, which are names that show the occupation of the bearer. Igbo occupational names often specify an area of excellence in a particular profession; toponymic names are family names/surnames that refer to the place/town the bearer comes from; and pseudo-surnames are not real names but can be used to identify the bearer and his offspring over time. Nicknames are examples of this category of family names/surnames. It is important to note that nicknames rarely become family names/surnames in most Igbo societies. [Eze \(2020\)](#) states that some Igbo family names/surnames evolved in order to distinguish people into groups, such as groups of origin, occupation, parentage or clan (p. 62). Eze argues that some surnames are related to events in the community, such as market days, deities and festivals. Some names depict the occupation of a person’s lineage, their location or their parentage (p. 63). [Ikotun \(2014\)](#) reveals that the grammatical structures of certain Yoruba family names/surnames help the hearer to identify the region or part of Yoruba the bearer comes from.

The study of place names has received tremendous attention in scholarship because of its relevance in tracing the origins and cultural and historical significance of places ([Helleland 2012](#); [Harte 2022](#); [Cacciafoco and Cavallaro 2023](#)). Place names, unlike personal names, have a longer lifespan, having been passed down for countless generations. For [Batoma \(2006\)](#), ethnonyms and toponyms are more durable than anthroponyms or personal names. Batoma further contends that “toponyms in particular constitute fixed landmarks whose durability makes them important data for historical research . . . more importantly, ethnonyms and toponyms constitute intricate and semiotic structure, a kind of palimpsest that crystallizes a layer of meanings of community experience. These meanings can be conceived as approaches or facets of the collective experience of a group” (p. 1). Place names express the history and cultural heritage of a place. They encapsulate the experiences, emotions and feelings of a place and its people. [Kijania-Placek \(2021\)](#) argues that an interesting feature of the names of cities and countries is that, in contrast to the names of people, whose default referents are their contextually distinguished human bearers, the names of cities and countries refer to geographical territories, political entities and groups of people/inhabitants.

[Harte \(2022\)](#) says that a place name refers to or labels a particular place. [Helleland \(2012\)](#) argues that place names are first and foremost labels attached to one’s surroundings. [Helleland \(2012\)](#) further contends that since place names have been coined as descriptions of the features in question, or of the circumstances that influenced the naming process, they are vital for obtaining knowledge of our past. Place names convey particular values to those who are familiar with the names. [Helleland \(2012\)](#) opines that the multiple qualities of place names also strengthen their role as part of an intangible cultural heritage. [Harte \(2022\)](#) describes toponymy as a sub-discipline of a branch of linguistics called onomastics. He further classifies toponyms into historical toponyms, which deal with the origin, development and use of names, and cartographic toponyms, which deal with the presentation of names on maps and in gazetteers. Most African scholarship on place names has chiefly focused on historical toponyms. African scholars see historical toponyms as a process of recovery and reconstruction of African cultural heritage, which colonialism and globalization have tried to erase or eclipse. Most Africans have strong emotional attachment to the name of their towns and communities because of their beliefs that

traditional, ancestral and spiritual names are a crucial part of their identity and, of course, their relationship with the land, their ancestors and their family history. Place names are an important aspect of our history and culture. Thus, [Helleland \(2012\)](#) avers that names, especially place names, are not only a source of linguistic knowledge, but also of geographical, historical, anthropological, ethnographic, social, psychological, or other knowledge, and may be of interest to the respective sciences. [Williamson \(2023\)](#) takes a critical view of contemporary approaches to the study of place names, which have been chiefly historical in orientation. Williamson's "critical place naming approach" takes deep interest in unearthing the ideological structures that underlie the naming or renaming of places as a result of colonial or post-colonial practices.

### 3. Theoretical Orientation

This study draws its analytical framework from the tenets of anthropological linguistics (also known as linguistic anthropology) and Cultural Linguistics. The phrases anthropological linguistics ([Blount 1995](#); [Foley 1997](#)) and linguistic anthropology ([Duranti 1997](#)) will be interchangeably used in this study to imply attempts to show the social and ideological meanings that underlie the uses of language as part of culture. [Foley \(1997\)](#) describes anthropological linguistics as a branch of linguistics and anthropology which is concerned with the study of the interconnectedness between language, culture and the social context. For [Blount \(1995\)](#), anthropological linguistics, as a subfield of anthropology, has language as its primary subject matter. Thus, anthropological linguistics is simply the anthropological study of language (p. 36). Culture, as a way of life, is a crucial aspect of human society, which is transmitted from one generation to another through the medium of language. [Danesi \(2004\)](#) contends that humans use language to encode knowledge and to pass it on to subsequent generations.

The study of language as part of culture has been an intriguing one. Linguists and anthropologists perceive language as an important component of culture. Both groups have looked at how language influences culture and how culture influences language in context. Language enables members of a society to express their social and cultural experiences as members of a human community. [Oluwabamide \(2007, p. 80\)](#) therefore opines that "it is quite impossible to conceive of either the origin or development of culture apart from language. This is because language is that part of culture, which more than any other, enables men (sic) not only to make their own experience and learning continuous but, as well, to participate vicariously in the experience and learning of others, past and present, who are or have been members of the group." Anthropology examines how human beings orient themselves within the semiotic environment and make meaning from the diverse symbolic modes that exist within a culture. Semiotic and cultural communicative practices enable human beings to express their social and historical experiences. This explains why [Duranti \(1997\)](#) argues that linguistic anthropology is the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice. Linguistic anthropology views language as set of social practices which enable human beings to express their knowledge of the natural and inner worlds as members of a cultural community. [Duranti \(1997, p. 4\)](#) thus argues that:

Linguistic anthropology must be viewed as part of the wider field of anthropology not because it is a kind of linguistics practiced in anthropology departments, but because it examines language through the lenses of anthropological concerns. These concerns include the transmission and reproduction of culture, the relationship between cultural systems and different forms of social organization, and the role of the material conditions of existence in people's understanding of the world.

Language enables humans to orient themselves in their social and cultural worlds. Linguistic anthropology perceives language as a form of social action that both presupposes and at the same time brings about ways of being in the world. The analytical framework of this study will be based on the three major theoretical frameworks developed within linguistic anthropology, namely **performance**, **indexicality**, and **participation** (Duranti 1997, p. 14). While the three are interconnected, performance is chiefly concerned with what actions the language-user makes with language; indexicality is concerned with what language points at or signifies within the immediate and wider contexts; and participation implies the ability of the language-user to use language to perform social actions in the semiotic environment in which they find themselves.

Sharifian (2017, p. 2) describes Cultural Linguistics (CL) as “a recently developed discipline with multidisciplinary origins that explores the relationship between language and cultural *conceptualisations*.” The notion of cultural conceptualization, the backbone of Cultural Linguistics, emanates from Sharifian’s argument that even though scholars dating back to the 18th century, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, have shown interest in the study of the relationship between language, thought and culture, “a unified subdiscipline focusing on the relationship between language and culture had not been fully developed (Sharifian 2017, p. 1). Cultural Linguistics is an improvement on or an integration of previous perspectives on language, culture and cognition. Some of the disciplines that enriched the theoretical foundation of Cultural Linguistics include cognitive psychology, anthropology, intercultural communication, intercultural pragmatics, and political discourse analysis, among others. Cultural Linguistics benefits from anthropological linguistics through its emphasis on the intrinsic relationship between language and culture in context. For Sharifian, therefore, Cultural Linguistics refers to how human languages instantiate diverse conceptualizations that are embedded in culture and cognition. Here, we are interested in the instantiations of culture in semiotic regimes, such as language, silence, paintings, rituals, cultural artefacts, and so on. Sharifian identified cultural schemas, cultural categories and cultural metaphors as instantiations of cultural conceptualizations. In the same vein, he identified *cultural schemas*, *cultural categories* and *cultural metaphors* as the analytical tools of Cultural Linguistics. The three analytical tools of **cultural schemas**, **cultural categories** and **cultural metaphors** in Cultural Linguistics correlate with the three analytical frameworks of **performance**, **indexicality** and **participation** developed by Duranti for linguistic anthropology/anthropological linguistics. Insights from Cultural Linguistics and linguistic anthropology, as a theoretical anchor, will enable the analyst to uncover the social, cultural and cognitive motivations and meanings that underlie some Igbo family names/surnames and community names.

#### 4. Data and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and ethnographic approach to data collection, interpretation and discussion. Wigston (2009, p. 4) observes that there are two basic types of content analysis: quantitative and qualitative. While the quantitative approach tends to involve counting and the rigorous application of the scientific method, “qualitative content analysis follows a somewhat different procedure, since no physical counting of data is involved. It tends to be more critical in nature and can be used when we need to penetrate the deeper layers of a meaning, such as a semiological or narrative analysis.” The researchers and their fourteen assistants gathered the data for this study between December 2025 and March 2026 from seven states in Nigeria, namely Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers. Competence in the Igbo language, culture and geography were the main criteria for the selection of the research assistants. Six of the research assistants were university degree holders, and five had National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND)

certificates, while the other three possessed the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

The data were chiefly gathered through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation allowed for access to the participants' environment, in which the researchers had a face-to-face interaction with the participants. Thus, the researchers and their assistants engaged in active face-to-face interviews with the participants on most occasions, but had to rely on telephone interviews in situations where a face-to-face interview was not possible. The interviewees' responses were recorded with a recording device or written down as the occasion demanded. Some of the participants were interviewed in their homes, community halls and other places they considered convenient for such interactions. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 min. Questions were mainly based on the five categories of family names and four categories of community names identified by the researchers. Participants were asked to provide some family and community names, their literal and contextual meanings, and their historical motivations. In addition, the researchers also used X (formerly Twitter) to elicit specific responses from online participants. A post was made on X (Twitter) on 18 February 2026 asking for Igbo family names that designate a particular progenitor or parentage and are prefixed with the *nwa* (child) morpheme, and community names that show direct patrilineality or ancestry and are prefixed with the *umu* (children of. . .) morpheme. Eighty (80) online participants supplied names and their origins and meanings, where applicable.

The educational qualifications of the participants were of less importance to the researchers. Knowledge of Igbo family and community names, culture and geography were privileged over educational qualifications. Adult males were privileged in the interviews because of their traditional roles as name-givers in most Igbo societies. Again, men are generally regarded as custodians of culture and history among the Igbo. However, a handful of women whom the researchers believed had good knowledge of their family and community history, or whose family names were among the names under investigation, were interviewed. Good knowledge of Igbo language, culture, family and community names and the willingness of the participants to be part of the research were the inclusion criteria. The exclusion criteria included poor knowledge of Igbo culture, family and community names and participants' inability to speak the Igbo language fluently. Ten participants were selected from each of the seven states covered in this research. All the participants consented to be interviewed and none asked for financial reward of any kind. The participants were adult males and females whose age ranged from their early 20s to late 80s. A total of 120 family names and 206 community names were sampled but only 40 family names and 36 community names were purposively selected for analysis and discussion. Some family and community names were excluded from the data because their meanings or history could not be explained by the participants and researchers. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Dean, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The data selected for analysis were identified and classified into related thematic frames that enabled us to construe and interpret the cultural and cognitive motivations behind some of the family and community names that are predominant among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. The study identified and classified Igbo family names into five categories, namely, names that depict special birth circumstances, names that portray family profession/occupation, names that express ties to deities, names that are appropriated from the *Osu* system, that is, *Osu*-related names, and names that indicate progenitor/parentage/special day. Community names were identified and classified into

four broad categories, namely, names that designate human–animal/reptile relationships, names that signify geography, names that indicate the number of original founders of the community, and names that portray the patrilineality/direct ancestry of a community. The above classifications reveal how Igbo families and communities use language to perform certain actions and index ideation, tenor and social meaning, as well as participate actively and vicariously as members of their cultural and semiotic environment.

The names in Table 1 are some family names that depict special circumstances that surrounded the birth of the head of the family, who may be alive or dead. The Igbo sometimes bestow on their children names that suggest strange or abnormal circumstances into which a child is born. The descendants of the bearers of such names may continue to bear these names as their family names or surnames. For example, Nwauzo (child of the road) indexes the experiences and social situations into which the bearer was born. The name Nwauzo is usually given to a child whose delivery occurred by the roadside when his mother fell into expected labour while on a mission to another town, farm or market. This situation is regarded as abnormal because roadsides are not appropriate places for women to be delivered of children. The name therefore serves as a reminder of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. The same can be said of Nwammiri/Nwamini. Nwammiri (child of the river/water), or Nwamini in some dialects of Igbo, suggests a name given to a child who was born while his mother was fetching water from the river or lake. Nwammiri could also be given to a child whose parents believed it was a gift from the god/goddess of the river. The researchers asked Samuel, a university lecturer from one of the universities in the southeast, whose family name/surname is Nwamini, to explain the motivations behind the name. He told the researchers that Nwamini was his grandfather's name and that his father did not tell him the circumstances that surrounded the name. Miriam, a post-graduate student whose family name/surname is Nwammiri, also told the researchers that her parents did not tell her how the family came by the name. She, however, thought that the name could mean that her grandfather or forefather was born into an unusual situation that had something to do with the river. Nwaekete (child of basket) is another family name whose meaning is foggy. The name could mean that the child was born in a strange situation in which the child had to be brought home in a basket. Favour, a university undergraduate, said that her parents did not explain to her how the family came by that name. She said that Nwaekete could also be a name given to a child born into the family of a master basket-weaver/maker. Nwabali (child of the night/darkness), or Wabali in some dialects of Igbo, is a name given to a child born in the dead of the night with little or no light available to facilitate the job of the birth attendants. The families of a child born in such circumstance may name him Nwabali to index the temporal atmosphere into which the child was born. Otuo, a university graduate who bears Wabali as surname, told the researchers that the name suggests that her grandfather was born in the dead of the night when the birth attendants did not have sufficient light to illuminate the room. The names in this category index how the Igbo society use language to express their knowledge of their situational and cultural environment. These names enable the families of the name-bearers to express ideation as participants in the semiotic universe in which they find themselves. Naming is a social activity or action that enables the name-giver to perform acts that tend to change the world or universe of the name-bearer. Naming is therefore a performative act in Igbo cultural context. The name given to the child becomes a badge of identity that shapes how the name-bearer exists and co-exists in the cultural and semiotic spaces in which they find themselves. However, the researchers observe a disturbing trend—while the circumstantial names are being passed down from one generation of bearers to another, the historical motivations for the names are not being explained by parents to the younger

generation who bear the names as surnames/family names. This implies that the cultural values of the names will soon be erased in the memory of the people.

**Table 1.** Family names that depict special birth circumstances.

| Names            | English Translation of Meaning |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Nwammiri/Nwamini | Child of the river/water       |
| Nwaekete         | Child of basket                |
| Nwaugha          | Child of lies/falsehood        |
| Nwofia           | Child of forest/bush           |
| Nwaite           | Child of (clay) pot            |
| Nwauzo           | Child of the road              |
| Nwaonuma         | Child of grief                 |
| Nwariri          | Child of regrets               |
| Nwabali/wabali   | Child of night/darkness        |

Traditional Igbo society used name-giving to index the professions or occupations associated with some families. Igbo society used such names to demonstrate that such families excelled in some areas of human endeavour, such as farming, hunting, black-smithing, fishing, wrestling, and so on. Besides serving honorific purposes in the cultural environment of bearers of these names, some of the names survived to become surnames/family names that younger generations continued to bear. This study focused on occupational names associated with farming. Yam (*ji*) is regarded as the king of all crops and a symbol of masculinity among the Igbo. Those who distinguished themselves in yam cultivation were highly regarded and rewarded with titles of honour in most traditional Igbo societies. While yam cultivation was regarded as a male-dominated occupation, cassava (*akpu*) cultivation was reserved for the female gender. Table 2 shows how the Igbo society venerate the yam crop by reifying it in surnames/family names. Ezeji (king of yam), as a family name, is derived from the cultural knowledge that the family which bears this name is descended from a lineage of great yam farmers. Cyril, an adult male who bears Ezeji as his family name, told the researchers in an interview that his late father told him that the family was historically known as one of the greatest yam farmers in the community and beyond. Cyril was not sure how many generations before him bore Ezeji as a surname/family name. The family name Obaji (yam barn) is chiefly cognitive. It is a cultural metaphor that signifies that the bearer of the name is a great yam farmer or comes from a family of great yam farmers. Osuji, devotee to the god of yam, is another name that indexes the cultural perception of yam in Igbo society. The Igbo ranks the yam crop highly, to the extent that some individuals had to dedicate themselves to the services of the guardian spirit of the yam crop, which is responsible for fertility and abundant harvest. Osuji, therefore, has cultural and spiritual significations among the Igbo. Table 2 shows that only one family name/surname has a direct relationship with cassava crops among the Igbo. Nwaezeakpu designates a family that is known for excelling in the cultivation of cassava. The downplaying of the importance of cassava, which is perceived as feminine by the Igbo society, represents how a patriarchal society semiotically legitimizes gender asymmetry (Table 3).

**Table 2.** Family names that portray profession/occupation.

| Names             | English Translation of Meaning |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ezeji             | King of yam                    |
| Ogbuji            | Great yam farmer               |
| Osuji             | Devotee to the god of yam      |
| Okwaraji/Okparaji | First son of yam               |
| Obaji             | Yam barn                       |
| Nwaezeakpu        | Child of the king of cassava   |

**Table 3.** Family names that express ties to deities.

| Names              | English Translation of Meaning          |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Agwu/Nwagwu        | Child of Agwu deity                     |
| Nwangwu/Nwaogwugwu | Child of Ogwugwu deity                  |
| Nwanyanwu/Anyanwu  | Child of sun god                        |
| Nwagbara/Wagbara   | Child of deity                          |
| Ossai              | Devotee of Ossai shrine/deity           |
| Kamalu/Kamanu      | Devotee of god of thunder and lightning |
| Agbarakwe          | Devotee of Agbara deity                 |
| Urashi/Ulasi       | God of Urashi/Ulasi river               |
| Ogbuide            | Goddess of Ogbuide/Oguta lake           |

Religion is one of the processes through which the Igbo construe their knowledge of their semiotic environment and inner consciousness. Kamalu and Ngwoke (2017) contend that the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, like most other groups in Africa, are religious people. The Igbo believe in the powers of the supernatural and the mysterious ability of these forces to influence the affairs of humans. Kamalu et al. (2023) argue that belief in the supernatural is an essential component of African ontology. The Igbo believe in the existence of God, and that God, humans and other beings can maintain some level of interaction within the cosmic environment. Orjikwe (2016) thus opines that “just as any African, the Igbo is aware that he is socio-ontologically inserted into a mesh of intimate relationship with other being, visible and invisible” (p. 152). Names and naming are linguistic and cultural practices that enable the Igbo to express their understanding of and relationship with the supernatural. Deity-related surnames/family names are forms by which the Igbo express their diverse relationships with the different deities in their environment. Igbo families that bear Urashi/Ulasi and Ogbuide as names are implied to have been custodians of the god of the Urashi/Ulasi river or Ogbuide goddess of the Oguta Lake at one point in history. Such names suggest that the head of the family, dead or alive, had some form of relationship with the deities that control the river or lake. Young children dedicated to the god of Urashi/Ulasi and goddess of Ogbuide by their families are also named after the god or goddess. With time, Urashi/Ulasi and Ogbuide become the family names of the direct descendants of the bearers of these names. Family names like Agwu/Nwagwu (child of Agwu deity), Nwangwu/Nwaogwugwu (child of Ogwugwu deity), Anyanwu/Nwanyanwu (child of sun god), and Nwagbara/Wagbara (child of deity) explicitly communicate the ties between the deities and the bearers of deity-related names. The *nwa* (child) morpheme that prefixes these names presupposes that the bearers of the names were either strong devotees to these deities or children dedicated to the service of the deities. Deity-related names serve as identity markers among the Igbo. The names help the Igbo to know the religious or spiritual leaning of the families that bear deity-related names. However, our research reveals that there are exceptions to this rule—not all families that bear deity-related names have any form of relationship with the deities. For example,

the large Kamalu family of Nnebukwu in the Oguta Local Government Area of Imo is a royal lineage without any explicit link to the god of thunder and lightning (Kamalu). Mr Igbokwe, an adult male from the Kamalu family, was asked about the origin of the name, since Kamalu is not typical of Oguta cultural names. Mr Igbokwe told the researchers that their great grandfather, Anyaegbu, named one of his sons after his bosom friend and business associate, Kamalu, who hailed from somewhere in the modern Abia State. That singular act of bestowing the name Kamalu on the infant became the source of the use of Kamalu as a family name in the entire Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State. Thus, the use of Kamalu as a family name in Oguta does not explicitly suggest that the family were or are devotees of the Igbo god of thunder and lightning (Kamalu/Kamanu) (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Family names appropriated from Osu/Osu-related names.

| Names    | English Translation of Meaning    |
|----------|-----------------------------------|
| Nwosu    | Child of Osu                      |
| Osuji    | Devotee to the god of yam         |
| Osuagwu  | An Osu dedicated to Agwu deity    |
| Osuebi   | An Osu devotee                    |
| Osunwoke | A male Osu devotee                |
| Osunkwo  | An Osu devotee of Nkwo market day |
| Osueke   | An Osu devotee of Eke market day  |
| Osuafo   | An Osu devotee of Afo market day  |

The Osu narrative is a controversial one among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. The concept of Osu has received different interpretations depending on the sensibilities of the narrator or knowledge-holder. Traditionally and historically, Osu is a label used to describe a person or group of persons who are dedicated to local deities. The Osu live within the precincts of the deity they serve, isolated from other members of the community. Osu people have limited interactions with other members of the community because they are perceived as the exclusive properties of the deity they serve. Osu people are therefore stoutly devoted to the deities to whom they belong. They are known for their spirituality, loyalty and devotedness. Many Igbo people have negative perceptions of families regarded as being of Osu descent. They are still discriminated against, in spite of the various legislations prohibiting such attitudes. As a cultural category, Osu is a label used to denote otherness among the Igbo. However, in spite of the negative perceptions of the Osu system in Igbo land, there are many Igbo families who are not of Osu descent who bear Osu-related names. This has caused such families to be wrongly classified as having Osu ancestry. The researchers discovered that the Osu words found in many of Osu-related family names have different contextual, historical, cultural and cognitive justifications. For instance, Nwosu (child of Osu), which, at the surface level, means the child or son of an Osu, has more profound meanings at the deeper level of signification. Our fieldwork reveals that some families bear the name Nwosu as a mark of prestige, suggesting that the head or founder of the family was a wealthy man who had many slaves and Osu under his enterprise. Again, the use of Nwosu as a family name denotes some form of spiritual devotion to a certain cause. Therefore, the families that bear the name Nwosu are not necessarily descended from Osu ancestry. The spiritual dimension associated with the Osu label can be found in the name Osuagwu (devotee to the Agwu deity). This name indexes the family as people who are custodians of the Agwu deity rather than servants dedicated to the services of the Agwu deity. Osu is also used as a professional/occupational label. For instance, Osuji (devotee to the god of yam) indexes the bearer as coming from a family of great yam farmers. It suggests the family was devoted to yam cultivation. Emeka, a university lecturer, and Justin, a lawyer, whose family names are Osunwoke (a male

devotee to Osu) and Osuebi (Osu devotee), respectively, told the researchers in an interview that they did not know the meaning of their names and have not asked their parents the historical motivations for the names. Both, however, were sure that they are not of Osu descent. The Igbo have four market days: Nkwo, Eke, Orie and Afo. Accordingly, there are some Igbo families whose Osu identity is tied to these market days, through names such as Osunkwo, Osueke and Osuafo. All the participants interviewed by the researchers gave conflicting and speculative reasons for the affixation of the Osu morpheme to these market days (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Family names that designate progenitor/parentage/special day.

| Names            | English Translation of Meaning |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Nwala/Nwankwoala | Child/son of the soil          |
| Nwaturuocha      | Child of a white sheep         |
| Nwammuo          | Child of the spirit            |
| Nwachukwu        | Child of God                   |
| Nwankwo          | Child of Nkwo market day       |
| Nweke            | Child of Eke market day        |
| Nwafo            | Child of Afo market day        |
| Nworie           | Child of Orie market           |

There are some Igbo family names that indicate a particular progenitor/parentage from whom the family is descended or the specific market day on which their progenitor was born. Such names enable other members of the community to formulate ideas and make conjectures about the family history or experiences of the name-bearers. Nwala (child/son of the soil) is a family name that affirms the aboriginality of the bearers. It also implies that the bearers of the name come from a **free-born** family. The Igbo discriminate between the free-born and the slave (*ohu*). The name Nwala thus encodes a sense of otherness that segregates the free-born members of the community, who are considered insiders, from slaves, who are considered outsiders. Nwammuo (child of the spirit) labels a family as one that derives its origin from a certain kindred spirit. Nwachukwu (child of God) implies that the family descended from a progenitor whose name was Chukwu (God). Although the supreme God is known as Chukwu in Igbo, there are some children who are named Chukwu as their first/given name. The idea of bestowing Chukwu (God) as a personal name on a child must have been informed by the experiences of the family prior to the arrival of the child. Family names that derive from the four market days in Igbo function as identity markers. They index the specific market day—Nkwo, Eke, Afo or Orie—on which the progenitor of the family was born. Thus, we have family names like Nwankwo, Nweke, Nwafo and Nworie. The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, as a patriarchal society, place great importance on the concept of *nwa* (child). The Igbo believe that it is the presence of *nwa* (child), particularly the *nwa-nwoke* (male child), that sustains the survival and existence of the family or clan. More importantly, the morpheme or word *nwa* (child) helps the Igbo to identify the progenitor of a family in question in discourse contexts.

Igbo communities use names to identify the descendants (*umu*—children) of a particular progenitor. However, the names in Table 6 imply a curious and complex scenario where it is difficult to determine if the communities are descended from animals and reptiles. Some participants interviewed by the researchers advised that the meaning of the towns/communities should not be interpreted literally. The participants said that those animals that are affixed to the *umu* morpheme may occupy an important place in the history and survival of the community. Some Igbo communities consider some animals to be sacred entities, depending on the spiritual and political myths the communities construct around them. The preliterate Igbo society was chiefly an oral society where myths were

passed down from one generation to another through folktales. The community known as Umunkita (children of dog) forbid the killing of dogs because folk narratives had it that it was a dog that saved them from their enemies during an inter-community war. There are also some Igbo communities where female dogs are forbidden because it was said that a female dog betrayed them to their enemies in the precolonial days when inter-community wars were rife. Obinna, a university lecturer from Ohaji in the Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State, where the names Umunkpi (children of he-goat) and Umuagwo (children of snake) are located, could not explain the myths behind the community names. He said that the myths have been lost to history but the communities retain their names as a mark of honour to the roles that the animal (*nkpi*) and reptile (*agwo*) must have played in the historical and cultural lives of the people. The researchers interviewed two participants from the Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, where the Umuebule (children of ram) and Umuaturu (children of sheep) communities are located. The participants interviewed by the researchers could not explain the relationship between the community names and the non-human entities. Umuagu (children of leopard) and Umuodum (children of lion) are communities who named themselves after two brave and deft animals. The communities must have had some real or imaginary encounters with the animals to warrant their affixing these names to their community identity. A participant told the researchers that it is possible that the communities cognitively appropriated the qualities of agility and bravery associated with the animals into their identity as a way warding off potential adversaries who would want to challenge them or intrude into their spaces. Some other participants told the researchers that those animals and reptiles that were affixed to community names must have been parts of the survival stories and heritage of the places. Some animals occupy significant places in the cultural and spiritual narratives about certain places. African folk stories are replete with instances of human–animal interactions. The narratives and myths of animal–human relationships enable some communities to assert their identity, experiences and history. Van Leeuwen (2008) contends that legitimization can also be achieved through storytelling. Some of those stories around human and non-human relationships help communities to preserve their culture, myths, and identity.

**Table 6.** Community names that designate human–animal/reptile relationships.

| Names    | English Translation of Meaning |
|----------|--------------------------------|
| Umuebule | Children of ram                |
| Umunkpi  | Children of he/Billy goat      |
| Umuoke   | Children of mouse/rat          |
| Umuele   | Children of antelope           |
| Umuaturu | Children of sheep              |
| Umunkita | Children of dog                |
| Umuazu   | Children of fish               |
| Umuagu   | Children of leopard            |
| Umuodum  | Children of lion               |
| Umuagwo  | Children of snake              |

The community names in Table 7 are indexical, as they tend to point toward the geographical location of places. The names explicitly provide a visual impression of the geography of a community. This gives the impression that the founders of the communities took their geographical locations and what they represent in the memory and everyday lives of the people into consideration. Geography determines occupation, cultural practices and ways of perceiving the world. The names in Table 7 therefore are semiotic processes by which the inhabitants of the places express ideation about their natural world and the inner world of their own consciousness. Obinugwu (dwellers on the hill), the praise name

of the hometown of one of the researchers, is actually located on elevated land overlooking the Oguta Lake. Obinikpa (dwellers in the wilderness) is known to be a semi-arid space without natural water resources. Ikpere-Oshirimiri (a community on the bank of the river) and Ndionuiyi (people by the mouth of the river) portray communities located on the bank of a river. By the names of these communities, people of Igbo origin would know that they are riverine communities. Ugwunta (small hill, now spelt as Oguta) and Enugwu (on top of the hill/mountain, now spelt as Enugu) suggest that both communities are located on elevated land. The Igbo hold several mythical and romantic views of forests. The forest represents many things in the imagination of the Igbo. The forest is the natural habitat of diverse spirits and mysteries. It is a place that harbours fruits and herbs for the treatment of different ailments. Thus, the name Umuofia (children of the forest) has a much deeper meaning and signification in the cultural cognition of the people in the community that bears it. Thus, some Igbo place names depict spatiality.

**Table 7.** Community names that signify geography.

| Names               | English Translation of Meaning       |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Obinugwu            | Dwellers on the hill/elevated land   |
| Obinikpa            | Dwellers in the desert/wilderness    |
| Ozara               | Desert/wilderness                    |
| Ikpere-Oshimiri     | A community on the bank of the river |
| Ndionuiyi           | People by the mouth of the river     |
| Umuofia             | Children of the forest               |
| Ugwunta (now Oguta) | Located on top of a small hill       |
| Enugwu (now Enugu)  | Located on top of a hill/mountain    |

Some Igbo community names explicitly indicate the specific number of in-group members that share a common ancestry or social bond (name + number marker). The numbers in the names indicate either the original founders of the clan/community or the number of different clans that amalgamated to form a bigger and stronger community. The numbers in these names erase controversies that may arise regarding the exact number of people who founded the community, either through common parentage or through amalgamation. The community names in Table 8 show how the preliterate Igbo society tried to express experiential knowledge of kinship and blood relationship. Mbano (four clans), Mbaise (five clans) and Mbaitoli (nine clans) are distinct groups in Imo State. The word group is deliberately used to reflect the sub-ethnic nature of the people. *Mba* means clan or people in Igbo. The people of Mbano, Mbaise and Mbaitolu are made up several communities who now belong to different local government areas of the state but are bonded by a common history. The word four (*ano*) in Mbano indicates the original clans of Ehime, Osu, Ugiri and Mbama, who make up the Mbano sub-group of people in Imo State. The Mbano people are found in two Local Government Areas of Imo State, namely Isiala Mbano and Ehime Mbano. The history of the Mbano people does not state if the four clans were four sons of the same father or four different clans that amalgamated for a common cause. The term *Ise* (five) in Mbaise refers to the five clans of Agbaja, Ahiara, Ekwerazu, Ezinihitte and Oke-Uvuru, who merged to form Mbaise for administrative purposes. Present-day Mbaise is divided into three Local Government Areas, namely, Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise and Ezinihitte Mbaise. Stanley, an adult male from Mbaise, said that the Mbaise clans may not have come from the same father but were brought together by migration during the precolonial era. The name Mbaitoli (nine clans) is derived from the nine communities that make up the Mbaitoli LGA of Imo State, namely Mbieri, Orodio, Ogwa, Umuohia, Ubomiri, Ifakala, Afara, Ogbaku and Ezizama-Obiato. Historically, these nine communities have no common ancestry but were joined together for administrative

convenience. While the numbers in Mbano, Mbaise and Mbaitoli index the number of clans that amalgamated to form a bigger union, mainly for administrative purposes, the term *ato* (three) in Isuikwuato (three brothers) of Abia State designates the descendants of three brothers, namely; Imenyi (the eldest), Isuamawo (the second) and Oguduasaa (the youngest). This research shows that the use of numbers in some Igbo community or sub-group names chiefly indicates the number of clans that constitute a bigger sub-group. The numbers in a name could indicate the number of sons who descended from the same progenitor who formed a bigger community, or smaller communities who do not share the same ancestry but merged to form a bigger group for administrative purposes.

**Table 8.** Community names that indicate the number of original founders.

| Names      | English Translation of Meaning |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| Mbano      | Four clans                     |
| Mbaise     | Five clans                     |
| Mbaitoli   | Nine clans                     |
| Ideato     | Great three                    |
| Isuikwuato | Three brothers                 |
| Ebenato    | Three places                   |
| Amanato    | Three clans                    |
| Ikwuano    | Four kinsmen/brothers          |

Igbo communities and families use names to identify the descendants (*umu*—children) of a particular progenitor. The Igbo place premium on *nwa* (child) and *umu* (children), and this explains why there are hundreds of family and community names that have *nwa* and *umu* affixed to them. The preliterate Igbo society used the *umu* marker to identify the progenitor of the community and the social roles the community plays in the cultural lives of the people in the semiotic environment. The Igbo is a patriarchal society, and thus the *umu* morpheme is used to mark male children who descended from the same progenitor. The names in Table 9 index the progenitors of each of the communities. For example, Umuisu (children of Isu) designates a group as children or descendants of Isu. In the Nnebukwu Autonomous Community of Oguta LGA, Umuisu descendants are regarded as the first to settle at the present location of Nnebukwu. They are the true aborigines of the community. To date, there are some cultural roles that are exclusively reserved for people of Isu ancestry. Umuasogu (children of Asogu) are descendants of Asogu, the first son of Oshikpa. They too have cultural roles, including royalty, that are exclusively reserved for the children of Asogu in the Nnebukwu community. Thus, the *umu* marker in Igbo community names help participants to trace their ancestry, construct their history, and validate the social and cultural roles reserved for their community, among other uses.

**Table 9.** Community names that portray patrilineality/direct ancestry.

| Names        | English Translation of Meaning |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Umuasogu     | Children of Asogu              |
| Umuisu       | Children of Isu                |
| Umuafonwanyi | Children of Afonwanyi          |
| Umuchukwu    | Children of God                |
| Umueze       | Children of Eze                |
| Umunze       | Children of Nze                |
| Umuobi       | Children of Obi                |
| Umunankwo    | Children of Nkwo               |
| Umuoji       | Children of Oji                |
| Umuokwara    | Children of Okwara             |

## 6. Conclusions

In this study, we tried to use insights from Anthropological Linguistics and Cultural Linguistics to examine the linguistic, cultural and cognitive motivations behind some Igbo family and community names. This study reveals that the Igbo attach much significance to names, which are a cultural token that enables them to express identity, ideation and cognition. We discovered that most Igbo names are carriers of family and community history, heritage, emotions and experiences. Some names embody the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people. The data we analyzed in this study show that the meaning of family and community names should not be viewed literally, as they embed deeper meanings that are tied to the historical and psychological experiences of the community. Thus, understanding how the Igbo conceptualize and culturally categorize the different experiences in their semiotic world is fundamental to understanding Igbo family and community names. This study reveals that the modern generation of Igbo speakers cannot explain the historical factors behind many family and community names. This implies that the historical and cultural values of some of these names will be lost over time if they are not properly studied and documented. This study therefore recommends that further studies on Igbo family and community names should be encouraged by research institutions and other major stakeholders in the Southeastern region of Nigeria.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, I.K.; Methodology, C.P.O.; Data curation, N.G.U. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt (protocol code UPH/FH/D.11 and date of approval 23 March 2026).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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